Women and the Criminal Justice System: Gender Matters*

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Summary: This article is based upon the 17th annual Martin Tansey Memorial Lecture and draws upon a long history of research with women who come into conflict with the law, who engage with the criminal justice system as victims, offenders or both. In keeping with Martin Tansey's life's work and the values he promoted that underpin independent criminal justice research, I highlight the importance of interdisciplinarity, participatory and creative methods for centring the voices of women and, thus, facilitating pathways to better knowledge and understanding, education, reintegration and social justice. In doing so, I call for more participatory and creative research from our research institutions that seek to make a difference not only by facilitating space for women's voices but by listening, paying attention to and working with criminal justice involved women towards transformative social change and justice for women.
Keywords: Criminal justice, women, gender, feminism, Open Clasp, participatory action research, creative methods.

Introduction

First, I want to briefly situate myself in the criminal justice landscape and I will then share the long history of research that sociologists, and criminologists in particular, have conducted on women, crime and justice, in order to outline what I call a *feminist criminological imagination* in this historical context. I understand feminism as the theory and practice of addressing sexual and social inequalities that has social justice at the centre. Gloria Jean Watkins, better known by her pen name, bell hooks, in a short book called *Feminism is for Everybody*, tells us that we should all be feminists, given that feminism seeks 'to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression.' Over the last three decades, my criminological research has focused on working with

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marginalised groups, sex workers, victims and survivors of gender-based violence, migrant women and girls, people forced to flee – caught in the asylum migration nexus, unaccompanied young people seeking asylum, children and young people in direct provision, young people involved in offending, and people incarcerated in prisons.

Criminology is frequently understood as the study of crime and criminal justice, and its methods are those of conventional social science, such as surveys and in-depth interviews and focus groups. In *Imaginative Criminology*, with Lizzie Seal, we argue that we also need more creative, cultural and phenomenological methodologies – creative applications of research that engage with lived lives, cultures and communities in order to promote social justice, using participatory action research, socially engaged, participatory arts and biographical methodologies (Seal and O'Neill, 2021, O'Neill and Seal 2012, O'Neill 2016, O'Neill 2010, O'Neill 2004). For example, a now fourteen-year collaboration with Catrina McHugh MBE and Open Clasp Theatre, who work with women involved in the criminal justice system as victims/survivors or both, has led to walking and theatre-based methods to seek and promote justice for women who are homeless, incarcerated in prison, who experience gender-based violence and coercive control. I will focus on the latter example in the final section of this article.

This paper is organised into three sections: 'Foundational work of Martin Tansey, Gerry McNally and AJCRD', 'Women in the criminal justice system' and 'Gender matters: Feminist criminological imagination', an approach to working together that I define as actioning a feminist cultural criminological imagination.

1. Foundational work of Martin Tansey, Gerry McNally and AJCRD

There are three key aspects of this cultural criminological research that resonate with what I know about Martin Tansey,[1] Gerry McNally[2] and the Association for Criminal Justice Research and Development's (ACJRD) ethos and values, namely: i) deep empirical research grounded in critical thinking to understand and analyse social issues or social problems or social complexities; ii) deep understanding of lived experience (for me accessed through

1 Martin Tansey joined the Probation and Welfare Service in 1965 where he served until his retirement in 2002, working tirelessly to bring government support and public recognition to the work of the Probation Service. Martin died in March 2007.

2 Gerry McNally joined the Probation Service in 1978 and retired as Assistant Director in 2024. He is a former President of the Confederation of European Probation (CEP) and former editor of the *Irish Probation Journal*.

ethnographic, participatory and biographical methods), so that we may understand the relationship between lived experiences and broader social and cultural structures, processes and practices, and this, for C. Wright Mills, was the basis for the sociological imagination. For 'neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both' (Mills, 1970, p. 3) so that we are able 'to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society' (Mills, 1970, p. 6). This in turn gives rise to iii) purposeful knowledge – what we might call praxis – knowledge that is policy relevant, that might intervene in order to create change. That we put the knowledge we create in the service of *re-imagining* and working towards enacting alternative social futures, in ways that are more caring, inclusive and sustainable – underpinned by principles of fairness and justice.

How might we do this?

By working together in partnership across sociology and criminology departments, the relevant agencies and ACJRD. In the final section of the article, I will share with you two examples of *participatory imaginative criminology* that operationalise these three key aspects – but first, Gerry McNally's recent interview (O'Connor, 2024) in the journal.ie is very instructive in relation to these three points above. Gerry mentions the importance of partnership working to reduce offending and create safer and fairer communities and fewer victims through offender rehabilitation; and crucial to this is *facilitating positive change*. This, he states, is at the core of the work of the Probation Service, working 'with people in the criminal justice system not as individuals to isolate but as people to be included in communities':

> 'Your purpose as a probation officer is about helping people change their behaviour – that's the focus. So you are actually working for the betterment of the community and the betterment of the individual.'
>
> (McNally in O'Connor, 2024)

Gerry references the *importance of critical thinking*, that we should not just follow routines, patterns or programmes/ideologies but constantly be critically reflecting on what we do, how and why we do it, and asking if there are better ways. As an example, Gerry talks about the routines we fall into, for example, through years of working in institutions, such as the probation, prison and university systems, and he shares that it took him a number of years to stop approaching cases in an institutionalised way and that 'the core

business of probation is in the community – it's about being enmeshed in the community, about being part of the community.' The core business is also about *changing lives*, showing people that there is a different way to live, giving hope and showing alternative routes or pathways supporting people, and providing the tools to achieve and live a different 'decent' life (see McNally in O'Connor, 2024).

In summary, Gerry's points here connect with my earlier point: i) the vital importance of critical thinking and thinking otherwise; ii) the vital importance of engaging in lived lives in the context of institutions, environments and communities; iii) making interventions for social change, by imagining and enacting alternative pathways in caring, inclusive and sustainable ways, for our collective social futures.

I use this framing to organise the rest of my article and, following feminist criminologist Pat Carlen (1983, 1988, 2010), this connects with an ontological belief about our social worlds that things can be different; that the task of criminology/social science is to account for social phenomena as well as to count them; and that part of our task is to investigate crime, law breaking and social responses and to 'imagine the "conditions" for them being otherwise' (Carlen, 2010, p. 1). Hence, we need imaginative criminology that is participatory, is connected to communities and that works with people where they are at.

What then do we know about women in the criminal justice system (CJS?)

2. Women in the criminal justice system

The research evidence shows us that women are prosecuted for summary offences, do not offend as much or as seriously as men, have shorter criminal careers, and are less likely to have a co-offender (Gelsthorpe, 2004; Quinlan, 2015). We know that poverty, trauma, childhood trauma, violence and abuse, poor mental health and addictions play a part in their life stories; that many are mothers and their pathways into crime are about economic need, coercive control, and chaotic lives, as well as difficult relationships with men – coercion and control (McHugh, 2013; Quinlan, 2015; O'Neill in Windle *et al.*, 2023; Gibson-Feinblum and O'Neill, 2024; Baldwin, 2023; Seaman and Lynch, 2022; Grace *et al.*, 2022).

We know that a large number of committals are for non-violent offences and the majority of women are detained on short-term sentences (IPRT, no date, McHugh 2013; Quinlan 2015; O'Neill in Windle *et al.* 2022; Gibson-

Feinblum and O'Neill, 2024). Women are a minority of the prison population, and housed in prisons designed for men. In Ireland, women make up around 3.8 per cent of the prison population and are located in two female prisons: the Mountjoy Dóchas Centre and, until the recent opening of the new women's prison in Limerick, a female wing in Limerick Prison. In England and Wales, similarly, women in prison make up a minority, around 4 per cent, 'yet acts of self-harm are around five times more common among incarcerated women' (Walker, 2022, p. 87).

The Irish Penal Reform Trust (IPRT, no date) reports that since 2011 the rate of female prison committals continues to rise higher than for men. Moreover, 10 per cent of female committals are for non-payment of fines, which is more than double that of men (see also Quinlan, 2015). The average number of females in custody in 2022 was 173, a 17 per cent increase from the 2021 average of 144. The daily average number of female offenders in custody rose by 14 per cent in the ten-year period between 2012 and 2022. Committals under immigration increased to 117 in 2022 after a decrease of 65.2 per cent to 86 in 2021, from 247 in 2020. A growing concern is immigration-related committals.

The IPRT has expressed serious concerns about prison overcrowding for women in both Limerick and the Dóchas Centre, and remains focused upon working towards policy changes that offer alternatives to detention and imprisonment, including open-prison. Supported by independent research, the IPRT highlights the profound impact of imprisonment on women and their families, as well as the economic and social costs to society.

> Despite evidence that short sentences profoundly disrupt women's and their families' lives, there is a lack of viable alternatives. It is impossible to not recognise that there are many missed opportunities to offer support. As pointed out by Baldwin, Elwood and Brown (2022), women could and should be supported at any number of points on their journey to prison – as a child and as an adult – instead, women are more often than not judged on their failures in their prescribed social roles.
>
> (Gibson-Feinblum and O'Neill, 2024, np)

> Having been abused by her partner and forced to move 'things' for him, Mary was caught taking drugs into the prison. Out of fear of being murdered, Mary, who was pregnant with her second child, pleaded guilty. Despite mothering through adversity, she came under scrutiny when the

> judge said, 'What kind of mother are you?' and told her that having her son put into care was his best chance of having a 'stable life'.
>
> (Baldwin *et al.*, 2022, p. 113)

Lucy's story of breaking the cycle was a 'mentally draining rollercoaster'. She had been through therapy, treatment centres, working with probation services and AA meetings but was consistently challenged and stuck in a cycle of relapsing, getting arrested, appearing in court, getting sentenced then released on either temporary release or community support scheme.

> 'Trying to pick myself back up again, trying to function with daily life signing on everyday with the gardai, going to limerick every week to sign on, attending meetings associated with staying out of prison in the city centre while needing to use public transport and inevitably meeting old acquaintances – while trying to stay away from people places and things to stay sober and also trying to meet my family's needs – eventually getting completely overwhelmed and the cycle slowly starts again with relapse etc.'
>
> (Personal communication with Lucy, 2024)

As a project support worker said to Gibson-Feinblum and O'Neill, 'there is no crèche attached to AA meetings'.[3]

Criminological literature

In the criminological literature, women's voices and experiences are often silenced or forgotten in debates about the criminal justice system, with relatively little attention paid to the voices and experiences of women caught up in the CJS as suspects, defendants, prisoners and victims. Traditionally research has been undertaken on, rather than with, women.

The early criminological literature about women and crime is largely about men, in that criminological theory and practice was written and practised by men and focused on the crimes of men. The ideas and concepts were then used to explain the crimes and deviance, or 'double deviance', of women. Many of the early feminist criminologists, such as Freda Adler (1975), Carol Smart (1976), Frances Heidensohn (1985), Kathleen Daly and Meda Chesney-Lind (1988), Pat Carlen (1983) and Betsy Stanko (2013), counter the assumption

3 Gibson Feinblum and O'Neill created Feminist Walk 2 in Cork, in collaboration with local organisations, focusing upon – Containment, Confinement, Resistance, Solidarity and Justice for Women. Available at https://www.feministwalkcork.ie/ (accessed 8 June 2025)

that criminological theories would simply just apply to women. They also worked to challenge the institutionalised patriarchy within criminological theory, criminal justice agencies,[4] practice and policy.

Contemporary feminist criminologists Lynsey Black (2009, 2015, 2018, 2020), Christina Quinlan (2015), Vicky Seaman and Orla Lynch (2022), Windle *et al*. (2023) and the Irish Penal Reform Trust report, *Women in the Criminal Justice System*, edited by Liza Costello and based on research carried out by Christina Quinlan and Jane Mulcahy (IPRT, 2013), highlight that:

> there are no open prisons for women or other gender-responsive community-based alternatives in Ireland. This is despite a wide body of research literature that shows women convicted of an offence have complex needs, and it now being widely accepted that a gender-specific approach is required for women in prison.
>
> (IPRT, 2013, p. 2)

The IRPT (2013) report makes two key recommendations: 'that a non-custodial approach should be adopted for women offenders; and in the few cases where prison is necessary, the negative impact of imprisonment on the women and those they care for should be minimised'.

Despite research undertaken since in Ireland, Europe, UK and internationally, there is still a dearth of research into female crime and criminality relative to that of men. Smart (1976) argued, in *Women, Crime and Criminology*, that criminology must become more than the study of men if it is to facilitate better understanding and also transformation of societal practices. Then, twenty-four years later, Smart (1990) argued in a highly critical article that criminology had not improved, but had become an 'atavistic' endeavour in the social sciences, due to its continued focus on men and the failure to take up feminist analyses and for this analysis to inform practice. Understanding desistance is a case in point.

Based on a long history of research with women in prison and her own experience of incarceration, Baldwin states that 'women who come into contact with the CJS have rarely escaped traumatic experiences in their lives ... may have experienced trauma as an adult, as a child or both … thus when

4 Seaman and Lynch draw upon a 2019 UN report that looked at women and discrimination in law and practice and found that 'institutions involved in decisions leading to the confinement of women (criminal, medical and psychiatric) are often dominated by men ... females are under represented, resulting in gender discrimination and over reliance on gender stereotypes' (UN Human Rights Council, 2019, p. 6, referenced in Seaman and Lynch, 2022, p. 41).

working with women in the CJS it would surely be neglectful not to acknowledge those experiences … and imprisoned mothers experienced profound suffering concerning the loss of their children, their mother status and role' (Baldwin, 2023, p. 25) Hence it is important to listen to women to understand women's offending and desistance processes.

> 'As a mother, a woman in addiction and going in and out of prison, courts, having my court cases in the *evening echo* multiple times carries a different kind of shame. For years I walked around with my head down destroyed from the public shame that comes with being a mother in this situation. Along with the shame of looking in my children's eyes and promising it won't happen again when deep down I knew I couldn't guarantee that and eventually I would let them down again and destroy the hope they build up each time I came out of prison and try to do my very best only to become victim of the vicious cycle again. That feeling of shame that comes from leaving your children down over and over again it's indescribable – I don't have the words to explain.'
>
> (Personal communication with Lucy, 2024)

Motherhood and parenting is challenging regardless of circumstances. However, for mothers like Lucy, who have experienced incarceration, negotiating a motherhood role can be a significant source of stress, especially combined with other existing stressors such as unstable accommodation, financial strain, mental health difficulties, and struggles with addiction or recovery (Seaman and Lynch, 2022).

3. Gender matters: Feminist criminological imagination

Given the weight of evidence discussed so far, we can, I hope, agree that gender is a crucial concern to any critical analysis of women in the CJS. Women do not commit as much crime as men, nor do they commit as much serious crime, yet as Kathleen Daly and Meda Chesney-Lind (1988) pointed out some time ago, the 'gender ratio problem' (why women commit less crime than men) and 'generalisability' problem (theories of male offending cannot be applied to women and girls) is not taken into account in most theorising, or even in most textbooks on criminology.[5]

5 Indeed, most textbooks (but not all) have a single chapter on gender and crime or feminist perspectives. There is a growing literature on women and crime.

The literature evidences that for women, crime is always stigmatised, they are defined as mad or bad, and almost always 'othered'. Research evidences that when women commit serious crime they are often treated more harshly than their male counterparts (Heidensohn and Gelsthorpe, 2007) despite the so-called 'chivalry thesis' (Pollack, 1950). The legal and cultural responses to violent and troubling women often develop along the following lines: 'make her abject from femininity and therefore monstrous'; she must then be rescued from abjection and recuperated into 'femininity'; and the 'feminine aspects of a woman's identity are stressed in order to neutralise her threat to the social order' (see O'Neill and Seal, 2012, chapters 3 and 4). For Pat Carlen (1988, 2022), 'analysis of women's lawbreaking and criminalization' is always in relation to 'the complex and concealed forms of oppression and social control which women are subject to.' Pat Carlen (1988) argued that where women are suffering poverty and have lost faith in the welfare system, they are more likely to commit crime, and women who transgress are subject to harsher controls both in the criminal justice system and more informally related to gender norms. That is, femininity, as described above, is regulated according to certain discourses, and criminal women, especially women who perpetrate violence, bring the edges of femininity into sharp relief, and this is what troubles society, a dangerous/troubling femininity.

When it comes to crimes against women – sexual and violent crimes – it is they who are pathologised, as much research (e.g. Carlen, 1985; Fennell, 1993; Hudson, 2006; Black, 2009, 2018; Seal and O'Neill, 2020; O'Neill and Seal, 2012; Baldwin, 2023; Grace *et al.*, 2022) and media analysis, such as Jane Gilmore's book and campaign, *Fixed It* (2019), highlights.

#FixedIt – Ireland

The Sexual Violence Centre Cork (SVCC), influenced by journalist Jane Gilmore's work and the centre's lifelong commitment to addressing sexual violence, runs a 'Fixed It-Ireland' Twitter campaign that challenges the mainstream media and social media to do better – by 'fixing' the headlines when women are pathologised or when media representations lead to 'victim blaming'.

> The campaign is run on Twitter and Instagram, where we take inappropriate and incorrect headlines and 'fix' them, tagging the respective news source to ensure they see the new headline.
>
> (SVCC website)

For example:

Irish Times: 'Gardaí are investigating claims that a 15-year-old girl was visiting hotel rooms in Dublin to have sex with men in exchange for cocaine'.

Fixed It: 'Gardaí are investigating claims that a 15-year-old girl was raped and exploited by men'.

Centring women's voices: Criminal women, voice, justice and recognition network

In a recent book co-authored by a group of researchers who formed the 'Criminal Women, Voice, Justice and Recognition Network',[6] the chapters draw upon the authors' research on and with women in the criminal justice system, as well as their expertise in innovative participatory and inclusive methods. The book explores how gender and other intersecting social inequalities, poverty, class, race and, also, abuse and trauma impact heavily on women's lives and how this 'informs and directs the criminal justice and social responses to women's offending and victimisation'.

The book was, in part, a homage to Pat Carlen's pioneering book, published over thirty-six years ago, in 1985, *Criminal Women*. This was a pioneering early example of co-production, collaboration and respecting and valuing each of the women who had been in and out of prison, their stories and experiences. It gave us first-hand insight into their biographies and the relationship between lived experiences and broader social and cultural structures, processes and practices.

Lorraine Gelsthorpe writes in the end note to *Criminal Women: Gender Matters* (Grace *et al.*, 2022) how the intervening years between 1985 and 2022 reflect two steps forward, three steps back in penal practice and policy for women. The authors wrote the book because women's voices and experiences are still so often silenced or marginalised in the criminal justice system. They wanted to remedy this by exploring through primary research:

> how gender and other social divisions (including intersectional experiences of race, social class and age) exacerbate the oppression and social control of 'criminal' women and how this informs and directs the criminal justice and social responses to their offending and victimisation.
>
> (Grace *et al.*, 2022)

6 Following a conference that we were all present at either as hosts or speakers.

Hence, I argue, we need more biographical, narrative, intersectional and participatory approaches to conducting research with women in the criminal justice system, in order to advance knowledge, understanding and recognition of women's lives, and create space for their voices to be heard and, in turn, to influence policy and practice. It is important to work with women and through participatory and creative methods and, in the process, facilitate public scholarship on these important issues – gender matters when addressing the inequities for women in CJS. Creative approaches, such as walking methods and working with artists, theatre-makers and film-makers through performances such as *Rattle Snake* and *Sugar* (with women in CJS) can reach a wider audience, educate in creative ways, authentically centre women's voices and narratives and, in the process, change hearts and minds – in keeping with the three points:

1. The vital importance of critical thinking and thinking otherwise – how we might do things differently;
2. The vital importance of engaging in lived lives in the context of environments and communities;
3. Making interventions for social change – imagining and enacting alternative pathways in caring, inclusive and sustainable ways.

The importance of centring women's voice, using participatory methods so women can tell their stories in their own words, in order to envision and enact social justice, is shared in the following two examples.

Example 1: Rattle Snake – *Addressing coercive control in intimate partner relations*

In the context of the Domestic Violence Act of 2018,[7] which instantiated in law the offence of coercive control,[8] and the recent Garda *Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence* report (An Garda Síochána, 2022),[9] as well as decades of research by feminist criminologists, we know that most 'women who are killed or sexually attacked are targeted by people they know and within a domestic violence setting' (Lally, 2022, np). Of all suspects in sexual

7 Coercive control was introduced as a criminal offence in Ireland on 1 January 2019, under Section 39 of the Domestic Violence Act, 2018.
8 In Northern Ireland, the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (NI), 2021 came into force in February 2022. This new legislation has brought controlling, coercive, emotional and psychological behaviour within the scope of the domestic abuse offence, and criminalises this behaviour.
9 And the introduction of the victim offender relationship field on PULSE in July 2021.

crimes recorded by the Garda last year, 98 per cent were male, while 2 per cent of perpetrators were female. Some 81 per cent of sex-crime victims were female and 19 per cent were male (An Garda Síochána, 2022, p. 8). Women's Aid's Annual Impact Report for 2022 details 31,229 contacts with its national and regional support services in that year. This equates to a 16 per cent increase in contacts compared to the previous year and the highest ever received by the organisation in its almost fifty-year history.

Rattle Snake

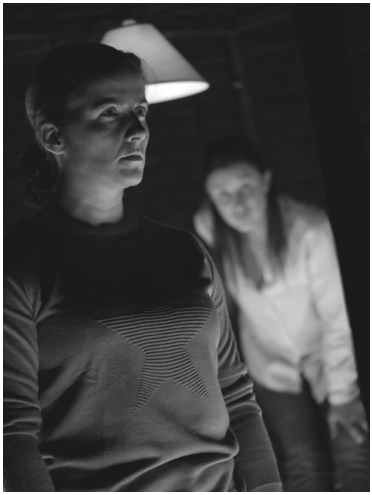
In 2015, the Policing and Crime Act in the UK instantiated in law the offence of coercive control. Open Clasp Theatre Company, based in Newcastle upon Tyne, was commissioned by myself and Nicole Westmarland, in a project funded by the Durham Police and Crime Commissioners (PCC) and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), to develop and deliver arts-based training to all frontline officers in County Durham, to facilitate better responses to sexual and domestic violence and coercive control.

The project was based on research identifying gaps in police understanding of coercive control, by Professor Nicole Westmarland and Kate Butterworth (Durham University), and the impact of participatory and arts-based research interventions centring women's voices, by myself. Facilitated by Westmarland, O'Neill and Butterworth, *Rattle Snake* was created by Open Clasp using participatory methods, listening to survivors of coercive control and sexual and domestic violence. Women's voices and experiences were central to the development of the script of the play. Women's voices were mediated by Catrina McHugh, an award-winning writer who co-founded Open Clasp Theatre Company in 1998, with the aim of 'Changing the World, One Play at a Time'.

Using arts-based methods and what we know from our research about the experiences of domestic violence and abuse, and coercive control, the play was created by Catrina McHugh, true to women's experiences, and was then used to train police officers in better responding to sexual and domestic violence and coercive control. The training had significant impact and, having successfully trained 398 officers from Durham, Open Clasp went on to train 1,000 officers in Cleveland, leaving a 'train the trainers' programme as a legacy of the work.

'*Rattle Snake* holds the voices of those who have survived coercive control and our aim is to make the best theatre we can to ensure those voices are heard. This play matters because we live in a world where there is a sense of entitlement to take away another person's liberty, to control and threaten.'

Catrina McHugh



Images: *Keith Pattinson/Open Clasp Theatre Company*

Open Clasp's Process

Working with women survivors, Catrina 'interviewed' (had conversations with) women and, based on these conversations and her readings of Evan Stark's (2007) research, wrote *Rattle Snake* (McHugh, 2017). Open Clasp produced the play, and it was directed by Charlotte Bennet, who described it as 'an epic tale based on real-life stories of women who have faced and survived coercive controlling domestic abuse.' The training, delivered by Open Clasp and supported by the research team, took place over three months. I attended all but one training session. Feedback from police officers at the Durham Police training sessions was excellent, with 98 per cent reporting that their knowledge of coercive control had improved as a result.

Impact – responses by police officers

'Very impactive!! It gave me a greater understanding of what life is like for the survivors/victims of coercive control and how this impacts their life as a whole.'

> 'I have a much greater understanding of the importance of safety planning because a "solution" is much harder to achieve – we need lots of support agencies working together. Great training! Learned a lot in one day.'
>
> 'The training gave a greater awareness of the ultimate consequence of Domestic Abuse. Powerful film where you felt the fear. Explored the best way to get narrative from a victim.'
>
> 'The course has opened my eyes. I now understand why victims don't report domestic violence.'

In the context of the Domestic Violence Act of 2018 and the new crime of Coercive Controlling Domestic Abuse in Ireland, we held a workshop in November 2019 at University College Cork, to share *Rattle Snake* with the Policing Authority, An Garda Síochána, Cork Prison Service and voluntary-sector organisations who support women fleeing domestic and sexual violence, including the Sexual Violence Centre Cork. Catrina shared the film of the performance, followed by a Q&A. The morning event was a success and all those attending requested that we run a further training session. This was made possible by funding from University College Cork, where Catrina led the workshop, using theatre methods, including image and playback theatre.[10]

The film of the performance is incredibly powerful. It demonstrates in detail how the character James uses coercive control to groom, and then psychologically subvert and destroy personal autonomy, by using force, threats and violence, and by isolating Suzy and then Jen from friends, family and neighbours, whilst performing 'good neighbour', 'father', 'stepfather', all the time ensuring that he is in control through commanding and compelling obedience, leading to conditions of 'unfreedom' and 'entrapment' (Stark, 2007, pp 205–29). What is viscerally apparent in the performance is the danger the women and their children are in.[11]

Example 2: Sugar *by Open Clasp*

Using the same methodology described above, Open Clasp devised – with women in a Women's Direct Access Homelessness Service, women on probation attending a Women's Hub at West End Women and Girls Centre,

10 This led to a Continuing Professional Development (CPD) delivered by Maggie O'Neill, Joan Cronin and Catrina McHugh.

11 A trailer for the film can be viewed here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A22GSfzvGdc (accessed 26 May 2024).

and women in HM Prison Low Newton – a play made up of three separate performances, called *Sugar*.[12] *Sugar* tells the story of three women caught up in the criminal justice system, Tracey, Annie and Julie. Tracey is a character created in part in a 'walkshop' I led as part of Open Clasp's residency at a Direct Access hostel for homeless women in Manchester, with Catrina and project workers.

Walking with Faye (not her real name) from the Direct Access hostel to her special place in the city affords a much better understanding of her biography, the trajectory of her life, of the child who experienced violence and coercive control in the home, the mother who left, the secure boarding school she was sent to for absconding, and the child who was invited into a car by a stranger and given £20, enough to buy batteries for her Walkman.

Images: *Topher McGrillis/Open Clasp Theatre Company*

Faye drew a map from the DA hostel to her special place, the park, through the areas where she works, the dark tunnels and passing cars,

12 A trailer for *Sugar* can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r5llz845MIM (accessed 26 May 2024).

> past the special tree she touches for luck, the outreach organisation that offers support, care, comfort and practical necessities; and she talked about the split second decision she makes to step into a car with a stranger…. Faye shared something of … the people she has lost, how life has passed her by and her fear of being alone…. We talked about her aspiration … to live a good and happy life, against the tide of her life, a tide that comes towards her, over and underneath her, often taking her feet away from her.
>
> (O'Neill and McHugh, 2017, p. 211)

Impact of arts-based research and outcomes

For the women involved in workshops with Open Clasp, sharing their stories can often be therapeutic. They have the chance to tell their story in their own words and to be listened to in ways that do not reproduce hierarchical structures or power relations. In sharing women's stories and experiences, in this case through ethnographic walking methods and interactive theatre and theatre-making, we can challenge myths and stereotypes and offer better understanding and knowledge, shared across the widest communities, that might challenge and change some of the 'othering' and stigma that marginalise homeless women and women involved in the criminal justice system. This is not without its challenges, ethical issues, and dilemmas (see O'Neill and McHugh, 2017).

Conclusion

The Criminal Women Voice, Justice and Recognition Network, myself and the Criminology colleagues across Ireland referenced in this article, and Open Clasp Theatre Company are committed to challenging and changing sexual and social inequalities and advocating for change in relation to women's experiences of coercive control and the criminal justice system.

Gender matters, first, by bringing into knowledge and recognition women's experiences of the criminal justice system – towards social justice for women. Second, through our separate and collaborative work, we have developed creative methods in action that have impact, that both demand and compel changes in the attitudes towards marginalised women, towards more just outcomes for women, based on connecting with, as Catrina McHugh says, 'the heartbeat' of their stories. Third, we seek to counter exclusionary processes and practices, underpinned by shared values and

principles of social justice, recognition of women's lived experiences, and a keen awareness of the struggle for recognition faced by women involved in the criminal justice system, women who experience poverty, homelessness, coercive control and violence.

We need to work together to create change, based on the three themes with which I began this paper: i) the vital importance of critical thinking and thinking otherwise; ii) the vital importance of engaging in lived lives in the context of institutions, environments and communities; iii) making interventions for social change by critically analysing, imagining and enacting alternative pathways in caring, inclusive and sustainable ways – for our collective social futures.[13] It is very clear that as a society we need to address and stop the incarceration of women, particularly in the context of the research highlighted in this article. I leave the last words to Lucy:

> 'I'm now a few months down the road and everything we spoke of in that first meeting I have received and so much more. Having the support of Cork Alliance – through my key worker, group sessions and my one-to-one therapy has given me the confidence and the belief in myself that I needed in order to change my life and get really excited about my future and going back to college so that one day I can be in a position to give back the help that was so freely given to me.'

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13 An open letter by criminologists across Ireland, published in the *Irish Times*, led by Dr Ian Marder and colleagues at Maynooth University, underscores this message:

> Research has demonstrated that sending someone to prison does not reduce their likelihood of reoffending, but can actually increase it. The State's own commissioned report on reoffending demonstrates how to reduce offending: by providing employment opportunities and drug treatment, ensuring treatment by justice actors is procedurally fair, and using community justice instead of prison sentences.

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